

Iraq Worries About Iran's Resurgence

By Trevor Rowe
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BAGHDAD, Iraq, Nov. 9—Underneath huge victory arches built in 1989 to celebrate the end of the nine-year war against Iran, President Saddam Hussein embedded in the pavement dozens of helmets belonging to Iranian war dead so they could be trampled by parading Iraqi soldiers.

These days the helmets serve as speed bumps for passing traffic, and their metal exterior has thinned and eroded. But the military threat posed by Iran has not faded, and Iraqi officials are believed to be worried about the prospect of resurgent Iranian power.

At the same time, diplomats said, Iraq is hoping that fears of Iranian expansionism will help pave Baghdad's return to the international fold. During the 1980-89 Iran-Iraq war, the United States and other countries maintained a "tilt" toward Iraq to help minimize the influence of Iran's Islamic government. Only after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 did Baghdad become an international pariah.

"For the Iraqi leadership, Iran is an enemy, but at the same time it offers Baghdad a chance," said a European official. "The leadership remembers the good times in the 1980s when despite political differences, Baghdad was supported by everybody because it was fighting the Islamic revolution and protecting the area."

Diplomats say Iraq is worried about Tehran's plans to purchase two Russian-made submarines as well as the Iranian seizure this year of an island, Abu Musa, that is claimed by the United Arab Emirates and situated near the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of the world's oil passes by ship.

In addition to legitimate security concerns, diplomats said, Iraqi officials see a chance to capitalize on the fears of other countries.

"Iraqi officials are convinced the West will keep a balance in the

area," said a Middle Eastern diplomat. "The West has interests in the area, and maybe these are in contradiction with Iranian interests and Iraqi interests, but officials here have confidence [Baghdad] is nearer to the West than the Iranians."

The European official said Iraq sees the introduction of the Iranian submarines into the Persian Gulf region as a "thread" that will enable it to restore relations with Persian Gulf states, strained during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf crisis. In a recent commentary in the government newspaper al-Jumhuriya on future U.S.-Iraqi relations, its influential editor predicted that the new U.S. administration will have to focus on the Iranian issue.

"Iraqi officials stress the Iranian threat during every occasion," said the European official. "They say, 'Look, Iran still has the same politics, they're buying arms. Look, they're occupying an Arab island. They have the same aspirations in the area as in past centuries.'"

In its campaign to heighten international interest on the Iranian issue, Iraq sent a letter to U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali last week in which it charged that Tehran had embarked on "large-scale deals" with many countries to obtain long-range missiles and to enhance its capability to develop nuclear and chemical weapons.

It remains unclear if Baghdad's campaign will have any success at this juncture. Memories of the Persian Gulf War are still fresh and Iraq's neighbors are wary of its intentions. While Iraqi officials have made no secret to diplomats that the "Iran card" offers potential leverage, nobody yet seems enthusiastic about being seen warming up to Baghdad.

In an apparent effort to ease fears, Saddam last week told a rally that "we shall not launch aggression nor shall we accept aggression. This is our principle." Diplomats said the statement could signal a change in tone. Said the European official: "It's an indication that Iraq may stop its belligerent attitude. He hadn't said this before."